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ABSTRACT

This document describes a pilot study to provide an opportunity for preservice teachers enrolled in elementary language arts methods courses at Indiana University South Bend (IUSB) and Southeast Missouri State University (SEMO) to communicate with one another over time and distance through electronic mail (e-mail). Students at both IUSB and SEMO must enroll in a basic technology course as part of their teacher education program to become familiar with the Internet and e-mail programs. To encourage use of e-mail the 19 students at each campus were required to exchange 6 e-mail messages with a partner, keeping a copy of each transmission sent and received. Students enjoyed the e-mail assignment and discovered that corresponding with someone off campus was informative, therapeutic, and a great way to share lesson ideas. Problems encountered during the semester included various technical difficulties, the reluctance of some students to use the technology, and lack of Internet access at one professional development school. The use of e-mail technology was found to have great potential for these preservice teachers. Through its use preservice teachers were able to share teaching ideas, problems, and concerns; learn alternative ways to help students learn; and exchange web site resources. (ND)

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CONSTRUCTING AN UNDERSTANDING OF ELECTRONIC MAIL PRESERVICE TEACHERS MAKING CONNECTIONS

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The challenge to fundamentally change public schooling and teacher education has been made (Goodlad, 1990, Holmes Group, 1986). One of many approaches assisting in this change process is a constructivistic view of learning which suggests learning occurs as a learner seeks out information and tools to reach a goal and, in the process, constructs a personalized understanding. Relating constructivism to technology, the premise advanced here is that applying a constructivist view to the utilization of technology can assist preservice teachers overcome their resistance to use technology.

The purpose of this paper is to describe a pilot study which provided an opportunity for preservice teachers enrolled in elementary language arts methods courses at Indiana University South Bend (IUSB) and Southeast Missouri State University (SEMO) to communicate with each other over time and distance through electronic mail (E-mail).

Utilizing field notes, reflective student questionnaires, and an analysis of E-mail correspondence, we will describe the following five areas: 1) background and development of the E-mail program, 2) the content of E-mail correspondence, 3) student response, 4) challenges experienced during the pilot semester, and 5) suggestions and future possibilities.

Background and Development of the E-mail Program

Students at both IUSB and SEMO must enroll in a basic technology course as part of their teacher education program. The courses at both institutions are designed to familiarize preservice teachers with the Internet and E-mail programs. Although all education students have been enrolled in the course, we had observed that many of them are reluctant in using the technology they had learned.

We became interested in the idea of having university students correspond with each other via E-mail after meeting at an International Reading Association conference session on cross-age pen pals. We discussed the possibilities associated with utilizing E-mail as a vehicle for pen pal correspondence and felt that requiring our students to communicate as a course assignment would provide our students a context in which to correspond.

In the Fall semester of 1996, E-mail addresses were exchanged and the nineteen students at each university were instructed to exchange ten messages with their E-mail partner. That number of messages was later revised to six as we were unable to begin the correspondence at the very beginning of the semester. Each student was asked to keep a copy of each E-mail transmission sent and each received.

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Content of E-mail Correspondence

Students were not directed as to the content of the E-mail messages We suggested that they treat their E-mail partner like a pen pal and to communicate whatever they deemed important The amount of correspondence ranged from several lines to several pages The difference in length seemed to depend on the type of students Nontraditional students for example, that is students over the age of 22, tended to write longer, more detailed letters An analysis of the content of the letters indicates that correspondents tended to focus on two main areas personal experiences and professional experiences

All of the correspondence tended to begin with general introductions As the students became more familiar with each other, several focused their letters on their personal lives All of the students discussed their public school classroom experiences and tended to compare differences in the instructional environments As they discussed the classroom experiences they often gave detailed explanations of their lessons and the planning they engaged in to develop lessons Several students discussed individual students with whom they worked as well as classroom management, educational programs, web sites, and university courses

Student Response

The students generally enjoyed the E-mail assignment They discovered that corresponding with someone off campus was informative, therapeutic, and a great way to share lesson ideas Comments such as the following were typical

From the first letter, we seemed to share a common thread and a commitment to education. Her letters contained some good examples of projects to do with a class of 5th graders since her field experience also was with that grade.

Once I started it was very exciting. It was a relief to be able to share experiences with another preservice teacher.

We exchanged a few ideas for lesson plans and our reactions about teachers in the classroom and professors in our classes.

I thought this was a great idea!!! I really enjoyed talking to my pen pal and sharing ideas. We wrote about twice a week, sometimes less. We were at similar planning stages of lessons and we shared ideas back and forth. It was also nice to have someone to empathize with

Challenges Experienced During the Pilot Semester

1 Southeast Missouri State University was in the process of converting all technology on campus to be IBM compatible As a result, there were many "glitches" as the offices and labs were being rewired

2 There was a continued reluctance of several students to use the technology

3 The E-mail addresses for some students were misunderstood For example, in some addresses 1

(the number) looks similar to l (the letter)
4 When students use an on campus computer lab to engage in their correspondence, there is a tendency for lab personnel to do the process rather than explain the process
5 When students attempt to send their E-mail at peak times the lines may be busy
6 The Southeast Missouri students attend university education courses in a professional development school Because the school does not have Internet access, there is not an opportunity for the instructor to help students who are having difficulty with the sending and receiving of E-mail

Suggestions and Future Possibilities

The use of E-mail technology has great potential for preservice teachers Though E-mail, preservice teachers are able to share teaching ideas, learn alternative ways in which to help students learn, exchange web site resources, and become a listening ear for problems and concerns

As we continue to explore the possibilities of E-mail with our preservice teachers, we have discovered that streamline our E-mail assignment we need to try out E-mail addresses to work out any address errors, share school calendars to know when students will not be on campus to read their E-mail, and provide more structured topics for correspondence

In looking to the future, teacher educators need to encourage, support, and provide guidance to students as they construct their understandings of the endless possibilities of E-mail and Internet resources As we look to the future development of our classes and an expansion of this pilot, we are interested in having our preservice teachers E-mail with children in different parts of the country, link with university faculty who are considered experts in their fields, and communicate through E-mail and web sites with authors and illustrators of children's books

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